Economic & Political WEEKLY

Appropriating Ambedkar
Author(s): Gopal Guru
Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 27/28 (Jul. 6-13, 1991), pp. 1697-1699
Published by: Economic and Political Weekly
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4398126
Accessed: 31/10/2014 10:55

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Economic and Political Weekly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic and Political Weekly*.

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 202.41.10.30 on Fri, 31 Oct 2014 10:55:03 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Appropriating Ambedkar

Gopal Guru

IT is not surprising to receive reactions to my report 'Hinduisation of Ambedkar in Maharashtra' [*EPW*, February 16] from S H Deshpande [EPW, April 27] and Dhammachari Lokmitra [*EPW*, May 18] representing two different religious forces. Both of them have tried to argue that Ambedkar still fits into their scheme of Hinduisation and spiritualisation respectively. But careful and unbiased reading of Ambedkar provides a lot of scope to counter-argue that it is difficult for either Deshpande or Lokmitra to appropriate Ambedkar. Because the fragile logic of their rejoinder does not seem to support their motive of co-opting Ambedkar.

Deshpande raises two major points in his reply. According to him I did not take into consideration the difference between 'Hinduism' and 'Hindutva'. Secondly, he still holds the view that there is a possibility of comparison between Savarkar and Ambedkar but for such comparison Deshpande shifts the responsibility on somebody else who cannot be said to have either adequate or unbiased understanding of both Savarkar and Ambedkar.

Deshpande, taking clue from Savarkar argues that "The term Hinduism means the Hindu, religion or more properly, the Vedic or Sanatan Dharma. Hindutva on the other hand means the quality or property of being a Hindu i e, one who belongs to any of the several theological or philosophical sects born in India. Thus, Hindutva embraces, Buddhist, Jains, Sikhs and members of all other indigenous school of thought"[1]. Deshpande argues that Savarkar did not want to protect Hinduism, but Hindutva, the Hindu people.

The distinction between Hinduism as a narrow category and Hindutva as a broader category worked out by Savarkar and now defended by Deshpande has problems at two levels. Does Savarkar really consider Hinduism as a narrow, secondary and less important component of his scheme of Hindutva? The second problem is related to the soundness and viability of his definition of Hindutva. In fact, a careful reading of Savarkar's core position on Hinduism and Hindutva shows that an appeal in the name of Hindu religion and even caste becomes a major programme for Savarkar who feared the mass conversion of Mahars to Islam or Christianity.

For example, in 1930 Savarkar argued that should conversion take place among the Mahars, 90 per cent of them would resist this conversion because they would be polluting their caste and caste panchayat which they were proud of[2]. Savarkar further argued that those Mahars who underwent conversion would be ostracised by their caste fellows and would consequently lose their caste identity[2]. In a desperate bid to keep the Mahars within the fold of Hindu religion Savarkar advised the Mahars that the real progress of Mahars could be achieved only by remaining in the same Mahar castes[2]. Moreover the need to protect his so-called 'Hindutva' from Islam or Christianity also renders Savarkar's distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva invalid because he is found using Hindu religion and Hindutva quite interchangeably[2]. Thus, it is much to Deshpande's surprise that Savarkar is not able to resolve the contradiction in which he is found supporting the caste structure and Hindu religion on the one hand and trying to project Hindutva devoid of any sub-castes and religious dimension on the other.

Savarkar's strategy of dissolving more than 3,000 castes into one pan-Hindu identity involves pan-Hindu temples, pan-Hindu dinners, inter-caste marriages, anti-untouchability programmes and the removal of injunctions on caste-ridden vocations and sea-voyage[2]. Thus, Savarkar seems to have admonished Hindus to break off the seven shackles that according to him hindered the progress of the Hindu society. Did this programme really denounce Hinduism? The answer to this question has to be in the negative because the anti-caste programme particularly relating to injunctions against inter-caste marriage and advocating vedic rights for the shudras and ati-shudras given by Savarkar did not have vigour and genuine thrust to attack the Hindu shastras and the caste system. Savarkar's contention regarding inter-caste marriages looked to be so casual that he offered only a qualified support to such marriages, thus replacing the need for creating any conscious motivation necessary for the radical mobilisation of the people towards reaching the desired end[2]. Similarly, Savarkar's attempt to grant the study of vedas and vedic rituals to non-Brahmins though apparently liberal may effectively lead to the Brahminisation of those non-Brahmin castes thus according legitimacy to Hindu shastras[2].

On the contrary, Ambedkar considers inter-caste marriages as the effective means for abolishing caste system[3]. But Ambedkar is also aware that inter-caste dining or even inter-caste marriages are not enough to eliminate casteism. He was of the opinion that for realising the desired goal of casteless society through inter-caste marriages it is necessary to destroy the belief in the sanctity of Hindu shastras[3]. And for destroying this belief, Ambedkar suggests that people should not only discard the shastras, but they should deny their authority as Buddha and Nanak did[3]. Thus, it can be argued here that socially radical Ambedkar was very unlikely to be attracted by Savarkar whose proposal, according to one of the sincere Savarkarites, contained reformative zeal aimed at revival of Hinduism rather than its denunciation[4].

Finally, it is interesting to know how the cultural component of Savarkar's Hindutva defies not only its broader definition but it also renders the comparison between Savarkar and Ambedkar once again untenable. As seen in the beginning Savarkar and his present day followers consider Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism as the part of Hindutva. But the followers of Savarkar miss the point that Savarkar refuses to accord importance to these religions, particularly to Buddhism, in his framework of Hindutva. For example, Savarkar seems to be despising early Buddhism on the ground that it diluted the strength of the Hindus by its belief in non-violence which rendered people weak and incapable of protecting Hindustan from Muslims and the British[5]. Savarkar's perception of Hindus as weak and victimised accounts for his emphasis on struggle and violence. But in contrast to Savarkar's militant Hindutva, Ambedkar's Buddhism preaches the principle of peace and non-violence. Thus any attempt to bring Ambedkar and Savarkar together is an absurd exercise which some of the Savarkarites seem to be engaged in[6].

According to Deshpande, Savarkar's Hindutva does not refer just to religious identity but is supposed to refer to the socio-cultural identity of Hindus. But socio-cultural identity does not make sense unless it is a part of the self-consciousness of the concerned community or it is a voluntarily accepted identity by the community in question. Otherwise it will not be a real identity but a fake, imposed identity. Hindutva as understood by both Savarkar and Deshpande is not the part of the self-consciousness of Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and so on and hence Hindutva is an imposed, artificial identity for them.

Deshpande's argument is fallacious because he treats the cultural concept 'Hinduness' as a kind of empirical concept which can be applied to persons irrespective of their self-identification. Even the so-called Hindus within vedic fold rarely identify themselves as Hindus, though they voluntarily identify themselves in terms of their castes. Even Ambedkar in the very first of his riddles in Hinduism points out the difficulty of knowing why one is Hindu. The essence of his argument is that a man who does not belong to a recognised Hindu caste cannot be a Hindu[3]. The question before 'Hindus' as defined by Deshpande is not how to preserve their 'Hindutva' which is a form without content, but rather how to become a true Indian and a true human being by sympathising with different cultural identities living in this country. In fact this is a question before people belonging to all religions.

This content downloaded from 202.41.10.30 on Fri, 31 Oct 2014 10:55:03 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Dhammachari Lokmitra's rejoinder raises one minor and four major issues[7]. While the minor issue is related to my unilateral imposition of 'dalit' identity on Buddhists in Maharashtra, the other four are serious in nature because they tend to question the quality of data on which I have based my argument, and my perception of Ambedkar's Buddhism and politics.

Before we take up the serious issues raised by Lokmitra, let us quickly tackle the minor one. Taking objection to my use of the word 'dalit', Lokmitra argues that according to his experience Buddhists in Maharashtra do not like to be addressed as 'dalit'. True, there is an urbanised microscopic class of so-called Buddhists which despises the term 'dalit'. It is generally observed that the Buddhists living in the villages and the slums do not object when Ambedkar is called 'Dalitancha Kaiwari' (The messiah of 'dalit' masses). Some research studies have also highlighted that Buddhists are moving towards much broader terms like 'dalit' without dissolving their Buddhist identity[8]. Thus, in the social and political life of the 'dalit' in Maharashtra the term Buddhist and 'dalit' co-exist rather than contradict. In this regard, therefore, the experience of Lokmitra seems to be absolutely localised.

Now let us take up the serious issues that Lokmitra raised in his rejoinder. The first problem that Lokmitra raised regarding my report is that according to him I am ill-informed about the activities of Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG) and that my analysis of TBMSG is based on Vinay Kamble's articles in *Dhammalipi* which according to Lokmitra are poorly researched. It is true that I have quoted from *Dhammalipi* but Lokmitra does not prove its flimsiness either. However, without relying on *Dhammalipi* it is still possible to prove how TBMSG is stripping off the political content of Ambedkar's ideology and making 'dalits' insensitive to their fundamental problems.

I have been conducting constant dialogue with TBMSG followers and have also written about its activities well before Vinay Kamble whose articles appeared in *Dhammalipi* only from 1989 January[9]. However, I must accept that I somehow missed the not so easily accessible TBMSG issue of *Golden Drum* which carried out almost an impartial reportage on Ambedkar's *Riddles of Hinduism*. It is not clear from Lokmitra's rejoinder whether TBMSG took up the issue of *Riddles*... and protested against the Maharashtra government's partisan attitudes on Riddles in its 'Dhyan Sadhana' class room. Neither is it clear from Lokmitra's reply whether TBMSG followers physically participated in the protest march popularly known as 'Bhim March' in 1987. Suppose the TBMSG followers participated in pro-Riddle 'Bhim March', thus giving the benefit of doubt to Lokmitra, but this participation as an extra parliamentary activity involving direct confrontation with the government, in fact, runs contrary to TBMSG's 'Dhyan Sadhana Shibirs' which seek to defuse social tension through meditation rather than confrontation with the party in question, thus the spiritual situation dominating every aspect of Buddhist teaching either in 'dhamma' classes or formal meditation class naturally limits the effectiveness of the protest, if at all it is registered by TBMSG in its meditation classes.

On the contrary the Buddhist 'dalit' followers of Ambedkar and other progressive elements in Maharashtra fought for the retention of *Riddles*... written by Ambedkar at every level of protest ranging from writing protest letters and articles in newspapers to physically participating in the 'Bhim March'. Even the Buddhist monks did not lag behind in condemning governments' anti-dalit attitudes on the Riddles issue, in the most militant language, and physically participating in the 'Bhim March' at Bombay[10]. Consequent upon this total protest the state government had to retain the riddle section of Ambedkar's writings.

It is in this context that I reassert that TBMSG's activities lead to the killing of political initiative of 'dalits' who are trying to confront the state and other communal forces not through the meditation but on the street, well outside the four walls of Dhyan Sadhana class room. In view of the growing threat of aggressive communalism of Hindu fundamentalist forces in the country, the guarantee of at least physical existence of 'dalits' becomes a core issue, and the anti-superstition programmer welfare programmes taken up by TBMSG are pushed to the periphery by Ambedkar's common followers who do not seem to be keen on joining TBMSG.

THIRD WORLD RESURGENCE

the Third World's own magazine

The 1990s will be a crucial watershed for humanity. Yet almost all the news reports we get are from the western media.

As our world transforms, we need to watch through Third World eyes.

That's why a Third World team of journalists and writers are publishing Third World Resurgence. To articulate the views of Third World groups. To give a Southern perspective to issues related to living and livelihood: environment, basic needs, politics, current affairs, culture.

Join us in this journey of discovery and make the Third World's resurgence a reality.

In our recent issues...

ECOLOGY: What Green Means for Third World; Global warming caused by rich countries; France poisons Pacific; Japan: threat to world ecology.

HEALTH: Global drug laws reflect North-South imbalances; Does Birth Control solve Third World problems?; Toxic wastes as recycled products.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: 500 years of Colonisation; Gulf: Most cowardly war ever; Myth of the Nobel Prize; North-South relations in the New World Order.

ECONOMICS: GATT talks threaten Third World Sovereignty; Real issues in Uruguay Round; Aid from Latin America to the North; TNCs corrupt Third World leaders.

THIRD WORLD RESURGENCE
Monthly Magazine of the Third World Network

Annual Subscription Rates:	Airmail	Seamail
Individuals	Rs.360	Rs.120
Institutions	Rs.500	Rs.200

Name: _____

Address: _____

I would like to subscribe by AIR/SEAMAIL and I enclose a cheque*/bankdraft/M.O. for the amount of ..... made payable to:

The Other India Bookstore, Above Mapusa Clinic, Mapusa 403 507, Goa, INDIA.

* *Please add Rs. 8 for outstation cheques.*

This content downloaded from 202.41.10.30 on Fri, 31 Oct 2014 10:55:03 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

But Lokmitra in defence of the meditation of TBMSG argues that it does not teach transcendental meditation of Mahesh Yogi's kind. But does it not teach 'meditation' concerned with the so-called transcendental reality, the so-called higher, super-human states? This apprehension gets further strengthened when Sangrakshit, the chief of TBMSG, talks about a movement from self-consciousness to transcendental consciousness without explaining what it is all about[11]. Suppose the TBMSG concept of meditation does not belong to Yogi's system, but does this spiritualism belongs to Ambedkar's system of thought? Lokmitra while answering this question in the affirmative argues that Ambedkar also emphasised the need for meditation for elevating the mind from its diseased state (hatred, anger and greed) to the higher level of sound mind leading to 'maitri' and 'bhavana' or universal loving kindness. Lokmitra, in his defence further, quotes Ambedkar saying that "the greatest thing the Buddha has done is to tell the world that it can only be reformed by the reformation of mind of man and the mind of the world" is the precondition for social change"[7]. Let us see whether Ambedkar really thinks so! It is clear from Ambedkar's speeches that he considers change in the material condition rather than spiritual condition necessary for bringing about total social change[7]. It is really surprising how Lokmitra missed this while quoting from the speech that Ambedkar delivered on the eve of Buddhist conversion at Nagpur in 1956.

Lokmitra is quite persuasive in establishing the dichotomy between Buddhism and politics which even a superficial reading of Ambedkar will show was not followed by Ambedkar throughout his intellectual and practical life. Ambedkar who was both a political thinker as well as practitioner wrote and worked out strategies of emancipation with the political dimension upper most in his mind. It is true that he did not look at the conversion movement from the point of view of formal parliamentary politics. On the contrary it may also be true that he did not explicitly delineate the political aspects of Buddhist teaching. But it cannot be said that Ambedkar's Buddhist teaching or conversion was devoid of any politics. In fact, a careful study of Ambedkar shows that his Buddhism and conversion movement involved underlying political currents with the potential of leading to the long-term emancipatory politics of the 'dalit' masses.

Ambedkar considered the *Gita* a political book aimed at upholding the teaching of the vedas and raising brahminism to a supreme position[13]. Applying the same logic of Ambedkar should we not look at Ambedkar's book *Buddha and his Dhamma* as a political book in as much as it negates brahminical domination. Similarly, as Raosaheb Kasbe has rightly interpreted Ambedkar's Buddhist dhamma is the basis of any political system based on liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. According to Kasbe, Ambedkar believed that a political system which is not based on dhamma would degenerate into an anarchy[14]. Moreover, Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion was not a religious conversion but was a strategy for creating negative consciousness among the 'dalits' against the hegemony of the dominant castes/class[14]. In fact Ambedkar has categorically made it clear that Buddhism is one of the essential elements in the process of bringing about political revolution leading to the overthrow of such domination[3].

When the TBMSG has obscured the political aspect of Ambedkar's Buddhism spiritualising Buddha and his 'sangha'[15] and the Bharatiya Bouddha Maha Sabha is concerned about ritual (mundane) part of Buddhism it is really necessary to restore the political content of Buddhism. The separation of Buddhist 'trisaran' from 'panchshil' is an attempt at not only the restoration of this political content but it also ensures the capability of reaching out to the larger masses with this political content. This separation does not mean an elimination of 'panchshil' which has meaning only when the necessary conditions for its observance are created in the first instance. These necessary conditions can be created only by waging common struggle and not by spiritualisation. Only Buddhist 'trisaran' can offer a common programme for mobilisation.

Thus, as it is clear from the above passage, I am adding a political dimension to Buddhism, but it is Ambedkar who tried to enthuse it in Buddhist teaching and practice to help the 'dalit' masses understand that the solution to their problems lies in their radical politicisation and not in spiritualisation. Therefore, Lokmitra and his TBMSG are free to sell their package of spiritual Buddhism and synthesise it with anything but not with Ambedkar's Buddhism. Because it does not allow such synthesis.

References

[1] S H Deshpande [1991], 'A Matter of Definition', *EPW*, April 27, p 1120.

[2] All arguments of Sarvarkarities mods so far are drawn from *Samagra Savarkar Wangmaya* (Marathi) [1968], Samagra Savarkar Wangmaya Samiti, Pune, Vol 3, Essay section, p 581.

[3] Writings and Speeches of B R Ambedkar [1979], Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, Vol I, p 68.

[4] Dhananjay Keer [1950], *Veer Savarkar*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, p 194.

[5] 'A Maratha Pseudonym of Savarkar' [1923], *Hindutva* Jagadhitechu Press, Poona, pp 20-25.

[6] Seshrao More [1991], *Manoos*, Pune, pp 50-58.

[7] Dhammachari Lokmitra, [1991] 'Ambedkar and Buddhism', *EPW*, May 18, p 1303.

[8] Contursi Janet A, [1989] Militant Hindu and Buddhist Dalit: Hegemony and Resistance in an Indian Slum', *American Ethnologist*, 14:3, August, pp 441-57.

[9] Gopal Guru [1989] 'Politics and Buddhism in Maharashtra' in Moin Shakir (ed). *Religion, State and Politics in India*, Ajanta Publication, Delhi, p 421. (This article was submitted to Moin Shakir in 1984.)

[10] [Bhiku Khero, [1991], Interview, Shivaji Nagar, Poona, June 15.

[11] Mahasthavira Sanghraasksita, [1991], 'Meditation vs Psychotherapy', *Dhammamegha*, No 49, Pune, January, p 1.

[12] S Bhagwan Das, *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*, Vol II, Buddhist Publishing House, Jalandhar, pp 151-52.

[13] Dhananjay Keer [1954], *Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, p 368.

[14 Kasbe Raosaheb, [1985], *Ambedkar Ani Marx*, Sugava Publication, Pune, pp 145-46.

[15] *Buddtva Manvacha Adarsha* (Marathi) (*Buddh as Ideal of Human Being*) [1981] Sangkashit (translation Dhammachari Vimal Kirti), Triratna Granthamala, Pune, pp 31, 53, 57, 54.

INDIAN SHAREOWNERS—A SURVEY

By L.C. GUPTA

Sponsored by

Securities and Exchange Board of India
Bombay Stock Exchange
Canbank Financial Services Limited
SBI Capital Markets Limited

Published by

Society for Capital Market Research and Development, 74 Vaishali, Pitampura, DELHI - 110 034

Based on interviews of about 6000 households all-over India during 1990, the study explores such questions as:

- ★ Who are Indian shareowners? What is their income, occupation, age, and educational background?
- ★ What are their preferences among 17 different financial assets, including fixed deposits, mutual funds, savings certificates, etc.
- ★ How has their number grown over the last 40 years?
- ★ What has been their risk perceptions among financial assets and experiences of share investment?

Hard bound (pp xxviii + 173)
Price: Rs. 180/- in India, US $ 30 outside India.
10% Discount to Libraries, teachers and researchers.

Orders may be sent along with DD/cheque payable at Delhi drawn in favour of 'Society for Capital Market Research and Development'.

This content downloaded from 202.41.10.30 on Fri, 31 Oct 2014 10:55:03 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions